

On the move – Puget Sound’s warehouse, logistics and transportation industry is booming

By Heidi Smith - July 12, 2018



Jason Imbruglio’s career at Tacoma candy giant Brown & Haley started in 2009 as a temp job that quickly turned into something else. Because he demonstrated a willingness to learn and take on more responsibility, he moved quickly through the shipping and receiving department to managing the warehouse and eventually earning his current role as distribution manager.

“There’s a huge amount of upward mobility in this industry,” says Imbruglio. “Almost all companies now have logistics chains that need workers.”

Regionally, the warehouse, transportation and logistics field is expanding as companies create more distribution centers in places like Centralia and DuPont.

“Warehouses are opening in the Puget Sound area as fast as they can,” says Imbruglio. “We’ve struggled to find adequate staffing during our seasonal peak and all the trucking companies we work with are experiencing massive driver shortages.”

Wages are also on the rise, particularly in the warehouse sector. According to Imbruglio, there’s been a double-digit increase in pay during the last decade.

Those who want to enter the field have a range of options. Tacoma Community College offers an Associate of Applied sciences degree in business with a focus on global logistics. The two-year program provides training in customer service, marketing and management while preparing students for jobs in warehousing, logistics and importing/exporting.

“We get students from a wide variety of backgrounds,” says TCC Professor Linda Cuadra. “Most are not right out of high school but are returning to school because they couldn’t get any further in the jobs they had without a degree.” Many military veterans also enroll in the program to learn how to transfer their previous logistics experience to the private sector.

Once they graduate, TCC alumni are eligible for supervisory roles, although most companies will ask employees to spend at least some time packing boxes to understand how the business works.

“We’re not teaching people so they can be on the warehouse floor,” says Cuadra. “Our students often start as supervisors and move up from there.”

At Brown & Haley, one-third of the staff are graduates of Goodwill Industries warehouse and logistics training program, a 10-week course that includes a component which prepares students to move into supervisory positions within several years. The career path is free to the public thanks to Goodwill thrift store revenue and private sector donations. Since the program started in 2009, approximately 1,132 students have graduated, with roughly 900 of them placed in jobs with an average salary of \$15 per hour.

“We have a very good relationship with Goodwill,” says Imbruglio. “It’s a great way to find employees who have a good foundation and are going to do well.”

Aside from safety and practical skills like forklift training, the program offers guidance in equally critical areas like work readiness and how to find a job.

"We teach them about customer service and conduct mock interviews," says Garuba Akinniyi, Distance Learning Programs coordinator for Goodwill of the Olympics and Rainier Region. "Some of our industry partners come and interview students to give them an idea of what to expect."

Instructors come through a contract with Tacoma Community College and the course is broadcast live to a satellite classroom in Longview.

"Those students go to class simultaneously with our students in Tacoma," says Akinniyi.

At the end of the course, they have the option of taking a national Microsoft exam on computer skills and a certified logistics exam. Nearly 52 corporate partners work with Goodwill to provide placement opportunities for graduates.

From an industry standpoint, programs like Goodwill's provide some level of security when it comes to hiring.

"We're not taking a blind leap of faith," says Imbruglia. "We talk with the instructors and ask them about students who are showing aptitude."

Sara Kennedy is one such student currently enrolled in the program. A former warehouse employee who has spent the last decade raising a family, Kennedy says the course has been instrumental in giving her the confidence to go back to work.

"I'm so much better informed than I was the first time around," she says. "I feel safer and more knowledgeable about the whole warehouse industry. It's a great opportunity to get back into the workforce."

She particularly appreciated the focus on so-called "soft skills." "The instructors are amazing," she says. "They help with things like communicating effectively with others, knowing how to work with diversity and understanding how to network."

Employers like Brown & Haley benefit from that approach. "There's more to it than just moving boxes or driving a forklift," says Imbruglio. "Goodwill graduates have a good understanding of the skills they need and what they're going to be responsible for. They're better informed about what they're getting into."

Many students from TCC end up working locally. "Our two main business sectors in Tacoma and Pierce County are medical and logistics," says Cuadra. "Not a lot of people go to work directly for the Port of Tacoma, but there are thousands of jobs related to that field and not enough people to fill them. The opportunity here is huge."

For more information, follow these links:

Tacoma Community College: associate of applied sciences degree in business with a focus on global logistics at tacomacc.edu/areasofstudy/careertraining/business

Goodwill of the Olympics and Rainier Region: warehouse and logistics training at goodwillwa.org/training/programs/warehouse

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